

Security and the “Smokeless War”

A Critical Look at “Security as Speech Act” Theory via Internet Security in China

Ally Butler

Former United States President Bill Clinton once compared controlling the Internet with “trying to nail Jell-o to the wall.”¹ Many share his sentiment; the sheer number of users distributed across the globe and the complexity of the Internet indicate that it is beyond regulation. Yet, despite the challenge of effectively controlling the Internet, policy-makers continually generate responses to the perceived threats that accompany information technology. Dominant discourses on Internet security have largely focused on militaristic aspects, and today most Internet users are well aware of cyber terrorists, hackers and viruses, which are said to threaten a state’s military organization and civilian safety.

Ally wrote this paper while completing an undergraduate honours degree in political science and a minor in journalism. This paper reflects her interest in international relations theory and Chinese politics. After a brief but enjoyable stay in the faculty of fine arts, Ally found her true home in the political science department. In her spare time she enjoys reading and writing creative non-fiction, traveling and cooking. She would like to take this opportunity to thank those professors and students at the University of Victoria that have continually inspired her to think critically, and have encouraged her to embrace challenges. In the next few years she hopes to attend graduate school to complete an MA in political science.

However, the diversity of the Internet suggests that it is not enough to look only at the relationship between information technology and military security. The Internet has become an important component in economic, political and social realities, in turn prompting security agendas to broaden in scope in order to reflect the Internet's reach.² An ability to spread the ideas, traditions and norms of cultures across boundaries has brought Internet security outside the military realm. As a result, policy-makers are now faced with the difficult task of discovering viable solutions to an expanded array of security dilemmas that complicate the already contested subject of security.

The threat of ideological diffusion has been particularly evident in China, where state authorities have taken extreme measures to control Internet use and content. From the perspective of the Chinese Communist Party leadership (CCP), the propagation of American values and culture inside China is part of a "smokeless war" that threatens to undermine the stability, legitimacy and identity of the Chinese state.³ Since the Internet came to China in the early 1990s, the government has implemented censorship measures and even attempted to create a China-only Internet.

Using China as an example, this essay will evaluate and unsettle the theory of securitization as a "speech act" advocated by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde. Speech act theory suggests that security expands beyond the military sector and is the "move that takes politics beyond established rules of the game."⁴ The authors define security issues as those staged as perceived threats to the survival of a highly valued referent object. In turn, an existential threat can endanger the survival of collective units, principals and ideas, which exist outside the state or military sector.⁵ Once a speaker performs a speech act and declares an existential threat, the issue is then framed within a special kind of politics where emergency action and rule breaking can be legitimized against a socially constructed threat.

I will argue in this essay that an examination of the Chinese response to the threat of ideological⁶ proliferation via the Internet both benefits from and exposes the limitations of the security theory offered by Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde. The first section of the paper seeks to explain the difficulties of determining what constitutes an existential threat. Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde break down referent objects into individual sectors, which are useful for isolating the specific threats the Chinese government observes, but provide insufficient explanation for cross-sectional overlap and determining the value of referent objects. The

second section of the essay will address the relationship between the securitizing agent and the audience that is necessary to generate an endorsement of emergency action. I will discuss the role of the Chinese state in conducting speech acts, the emergent actions they take, and the difficulties of determining their target audience. From here I will move to discuss the place for virtual communities in the process of securitization, as they broaden the number of people who can "speak security," while simultaneously threatening the explanatory power of speech act theory. This essay will not deal with the militaristic threats that exist due to the Internet. The Internet confirms the need for an extensive conceptualization of security that Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde advocate, but also demonstrates the difficulty of defining the concept through speech acts.

What Constitutes a Threat?

In order to explain the ways in which the Internet complicates speech act theory, it is first necessary to determine what the Chinese authorities recognize as a threat. For Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, a security issue must be posed as an "existential threat to a designated referent object."⁷ Framed in this manner, a threat obtains its meaning through a dependent relationship to the particular object that is in danger. In an effort to try and isolate the character of a threat, Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde separate referent objects according to military, political, economic, societal and environmental sectors.⁸ In parsing out objects, they make a move beyond traditional security studies that tend to focus on military matters, to a broader, more inclusive conception, which accommodates areas of security outside the war apparatus.

Existential threats posed by the Internet in China can be understood in relation to the referent objects of ideology and sovereignty that exist in Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde's political sector. In China, the Internet provides an alternative political space that is not state-run and therefore opens the door for the dissemination of ideas that counter state ideology. Through online chat forums, e-mail and various websites, Internet users in China can speak out against the government in a way that was previously impossible. As a result, a new sense of popular nationalism has developed among citizens that are discontented with state practices and policies. According to Shih-Diing LIU, China's popular nationalism is considered to be its own autonomous political space that is separate from state nationalism.⁹ Popular nationalism delegitimizes

the Chinese Communist Party's claim that as the authority it represents the fundamental interests of the majority of citizens.¹⁰ The online opinions of cyber-nationalism undermine the very foundation upon which state sovereignty relies because they run in direct opposition to state-produced beliefs.

While Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde's political sector is helpful in explaining Internet threats outside the military, it also exposes the limitations of a categorical system. In reality, ideological threats are not easily put into distinct moulds, but carry over into other sectors, even if not explicitly. Internet security threats break down the divisions between sectors, as they tend to overlap and blur the lines that divide one referent object from another. In this case, a consistent threat of ideological diffusion permeates from one sector to the next.

That being said, ideological threats do exist in the societal sector where the Internet is characterized as posing an existential threat to the maintenance of a distinct Chinese culture. According to Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, the referent object of the societal sector is collective identities, such as religion.¹¹ While the CCP uses the idea of identity in Internet security discourse, their interpretation runs counter to Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde's. In their theory, "collective identities" function independent of the state, yet the Chinese government makes identity a constituting principle of the state itself. The Internet is characterized as an object that advocates an identity filled with ideas and values that have the potential to pollute the current cultural identity of China. Under this framework, the threat necessitates "firm measures... to prevent its spread, [or] people will fall prey to it and be led astray, with grave consequences."¹² In the past, the CCP has announced that China requires a "cultural army" which is indispensable for uniting China in its effort to advance Chinese causes "with one heart and one mind."¹³ It is evident that government authorities feel the Internet threatens the promotion of the distinctive qualities that represent the "true" and "natural" China. An invasion to the cultural unity of China is a simultaneous intrusion on the ideological premises upon which the state's conception of culture rests.

Within the societal sector ideological threats further disrupt the unity of Chinese society when they pose a danger to state-preferred mechanisms of societal organization. The social organization of China requires a prior understanding of the ideas and values that the Chinese authorities structure society around. The participatory nature of the Internet has facilitated a new bottom-up sentiment among citizens. A

decentralized approach to societal regulation runs contrary to the top-down approach required to maintain control in an authoritarian regime. While at first, this may not appear as a socially-based threat, many scholars argue the Internet has fostered a new of civil society in China. The concept of civil society, as set out by Guobin Yang, relies on four basic elements:

(1) autonomous individuals and (2) civic associations in relation to the state, (3) engaged in more or less organized activities in a (4) public sphere outside the immediate control of the state, but not entirely contained within the private sphere of the family.¹⁴

Here, collective organizations function as a tool that champions the interests of autonomous citizens over the ideology of the state. It is arguable that these societal groups, which exist outside of state control, are not seen as a valuable component to flourishing society. Instead, the CCP views the creation of new identities as a fresh way to organize popular dissent and resistance against the state’s accepted norms.

Ideology has a pervasive nature and plays an important role in multiple aspects of the state. Therefore, it needs to be considered a valued object in the societal as well as the political sector. Perhaps existential threats need to be first distinguished in terms of a referent object, in this case ideology, and then later evaluated in terms of their place within different sectors of society. This would eliminate the idea of sectorial boundaries, and allow for a more in-depth assessment of one specific referent object. A particular referent object could then be characterized differently according to the nature of its categorical contexts and evaluated according to its relative value within each sector.

Requirements for Successful Securitization

In order for a security issue to become an act of securitization, an existential threat must be recognized through a speech act. Once a threat is perceived to exist, it only enters the realm of security when an actor portrays the issue as such and raises it to a level above regular political problems. Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde state that something takes a step towards being securitized when someone “speaks” security and in the process declares an emergency condition.¹⁵ Through language, a securitizer af-

firms that an existential threat requires special action, which surpasses standard response measures.

However, full securitization only occurs if the audience accepts the need for emergency action outside the normal conditions. The security act is a two-way street:

[It] is negotiated between the securitizer and the audience – that is internally within the unit – but thereby the securitizing agent can obtain permission to override rules, that would otherwise bind it. Typically, the agent will override such rules, because by depicting a threat the securitizing agent often says someone cannot be dealt with in a normal way.¹⁶

Who, then, are the people that are most likely to be successful securitizing actors? Since a successful securitization necessitates societal consensus, it follows that the securitizing actor needs a certain degree of authority. Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde acknowledge this, and suggest that some actors are naturally located in positions of power that increase the likelihood of the audience accepting the claims in the securitizing attempt.¹⁷ People in powerful and influential positions are therefore likely to speak security, which means that traditionally those in government define threats.

When the Chinese State Speaks Security...

Since authoritarian states rely on information control to sustain a political monopoly, government authorities in China have taken on the role of the securitizing agent. When analyzed against Buzan and Wæver's speech act theory, it is obvious that the Chinese government repeatedly takes the step that moves political issues towards security issues. The Internet is portrayed through state discourse as a battleground for political stability:

In addition, it has become not only an important battlefield in ideology and public opinion, but also a new sector in the struggle for international opinion. Hostile forces, both at home and abroad, have been sparing no efforts to take advantage of this battlefield infiltration.... It requires that we use and promote the valuable content

and eliminate the negative stuff. We must solve the problem [and] strengthen our positive propaganda and influence the Internet.¹⁸

The CCP utters speech acts about ideological issues that threaten the survival of current societal infrastructures, connections and networks. The Internet has been characterized as a Western initiative to further global governance that leads the creation of international structures that challenge China's "information borders."¹⁹ These various forms of state rhetoric all portray a perceived threat; the Internet is an invader that will destroy the strength and characteristics that Chinese nationalists take pride in and cherish.

The government's measures to combat the threat of complex ideological realignments are firmly embedded in the state apparatus. The CCP continues to maintain a heavy-handed top-down information hierarchy. The Ministry of Information Industry, the Ministry of Public Security and the Bureau for the Protection of State Secrets are all involved in Internet control. An extensive list of forbidden contents that details the items banned from electronic publication and distribution gives a full overview of the government's targets; the third item, any content that "damages the honour and interests of the state"²⁰ illustrates the vagueness of the language, leaving it open to multiple interpretations by the state.²¹ The state has even gone so far as to suggest the creation of a China-only Internet, but after an unsuccessful effort, now relies on control by flooding the Internet with approved sites and specific network channels.

In comparison to other countries, the Chinese authorities make rather extreme attempts at Internet control through actions that Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde would classify as rule-breakers. Internet users have been penalized for influencing the norms and behaviours of the public. For instance, in 1998 businessman Lin Hai was arrested after he sold thirty thousand e-mail addresses in China to a New York-based organization that distributes a pro-democratic newsletter via e-mail in China.²² The pro-democratic content threatened the CCP's socialism and therefore an effort to enforce established Internet regulations was made.

...Who Listens

Opposition to government initiatives demonstrates that the rhetoric used to justify security measures is far from sailable, popular and accepted by

the Chinese population. According to Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, a successful act of securitization only occurs when the significant audience agrees that the threat warrants the regular rules need to be broken for the sake of security.²³ Acceptance of Internet control in China brings to light the inherent difficulties in the relationship between the securitizing agent and the audience.

Unfortunately, Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde fail to detail a mechanism for distinguishing what type of audience fulfills the requirement for securitization. If the Chinese example is evaluated, assuming that the significant audience only includes those that already agree with government policy, then securitization is more likely to be successful. A large number of people in China do agree with government ideas, and this is evident through the relative approval of some citizens towards Internet control. In an analysis of online forum use in China, Shih-Diing LIU discovered that forum users usually fall into two camps: for or against the government.²⁴ Those who support government initiatives expressed fears of social unrest and disorder that would follow if the government failed to control Internet opposition.²⁵ The persistence of ideological turf wars between government supporters and dissidents remains an obstacle in the path to full securitization. This would suggest that the security issue never moves beyond the move towards securitization to achieve absolute securitization.

It is important to consider the possibility that audience agreement is forced through psychological control. Chinese Internet users are more likely to abide by rules when they are afraid of the punishment that waits if they do not self-police their web use. So long as police forces and courts are sporadically active the appearance of effective deterrence mechanisms invoke fear in Internet users who do not want to suffer serious consequences.²⁶ Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde admit that acceptance does not have to come without coercion.²⁷ However, forced acceptance would undermine the discourse of the speech act; if audiences accept the state's desire for emergent actions out of fear, the securitization act is no longer legitimate as the audience had no choice but to recognize emergency measures.

Fierce online debates also illustrate that a large number of people do not accept the government's stance that the Internet is an ideological threat. The question is, do these citizens count as a "significant audience?" It would be unfair to simply discount this audience by labeling them as dissidents from the beginning and negating their opinions. In fact, the rhetoric used by the state seems to use this "dangerous" au-

dience to strengthen the credibility of their threat. As more and more people become Internet users, this portion of the audience is likely to increase, especially since most new Internet users are young. The generational gap between government supporters and those in opposition could help to account for the growing audience of people who have rejected securitization. Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde do not provide a viable solution for situations that involve separate audiences who are equally effected by the states securitizing actions.

As a specific example, the power and proliferation of unofficial discourse surrounding deliberative democracy has made it increasingly hard to convince audiences that the Internet is an ideological threat. While it is not clear as to whether the Internet will foster democracy in China, the state has clearly identified existential threats that relate to democratic ideals. Websites banned in China, such as CNN, BBC and *The New York Times* are usually based in Western countries where democracy is believed to be a precondition for human rights and a high standard of living.²⁸ Democratic ideals are a high priority on the CCP's list of anti-regime ideas that work to undermine their authority. However, the global presence and support for democracy has made it increasingly difficult to convince people that democracy itself is a threat that calls for emergency action.

The process of defining an audience is further complicated by the Internet's capacity for spreading information regardless of state boundaries. The Internet allows for an unprecedented flow of communication throughout the world with speed and ease. It has opened up a global ear to listen to the articulation of social problems in China. Engagement in political issues is not confined to a particular group of people within China, but information is passed from one person to the next at the click of a button. Today, the potential for a global audience further confuses the possibility of legitimizing security actions. Political participation and engagement in social issues has never been easier; the complexity, diversity and fluidity of the audience have never been more ambiguous.

The Voices of Bandwidth

Dynamic Internet organizations problematize who has the ability to speak security. The Internet works to "redefine and reconceptualize" community, so that geographic proximity is not longer a factor. Instead, shared experiences are the common denominator in forging relation-

ships ties.²⁹ New virtual communities tend to form in chat rooms, and are defined as “social aggregations that emerge when enough people carry on those public discussions, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.”³⁰ As new communities gain membership and credibility they have a greater influence and authority among respective peers. Now, individuals and groups from both within and outside the state can engage in speech acts, which infinitely broadens the pool of securitizing actors.

The intersubjective nature of Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde’s theory allows autonomous organizations that have developed alongside civil society to articulate their own security threats. They too identify ideological threats; Internet censorship furthers the CCP’s monopoly and restrictions on personal freedoms and thought that official discourse purports. The tendency for Internet communities to engage in speech acts can be seen in the mobilization and participation of anti-government protests in China. In his critical security analysis, Paul Williams warns that “acts of securitization quickly proliferate with all kinds of social groups” due to the intersubjectivity of Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde’s theory.³¹ Speaking security is no longer restricted to traditional positions of authority, and power relations have been shifted to favour the average citizen. However, if such a large range of people can speak security, the theory becomes convoluted and lost in intricacy. As it moves towards a greater level of abstraction, it loses its ability to explain security at all.

Conclusion

Despite being a relatively new phenomenon, the Internet poses a significant challenge to the concept of security. Over the past few decades, the Chinese government has embraced information technology as an aid to economic modernization, but has also found it necessary to regulate. The security as speech act theory developed by Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde attempts to reconceptualize the notion of security beyond traditional views. It has been argued in this essay that the theory is useful when investigating the security of Internet-based ideological diffusion in China, but often falls short when asked to explain all the challenges presented by the Internet. The sectors that speech act theory employs are helpful when distinguishing the nature of referent objects, but upon examination appear too narrowly conceived. The Internet in China also calls into question who speaks security and to what audience. Traditionally figures in positions of power have the most success in achieving legitimacy

for emergent security action. However, this notion has been debunked by the proliferation of anti-government discourse in chat rooms, forums and e-mails. As fewer people accept the state's idea that the Internet is a threat, audience acceptance is jeopardized. In addition, new collectivities and virtual communities provide authority to opposing ideas and values that have in turn become securitized. The ability to speak security is no longer limited to traditional positions of authority, but the extension of securitizing agents questions where the line between actual security issues and perceived issues is drawn. In the end, the deliberative discussions and socially generated threats that stem from Internet use make it an unique challenge that is bound to perplex security scholars for years to come.

Appendix: List of Forbidden Internet Content

Any information that involves the following is forbidden:

1. Contradicts the principles defined in the constitution [of the PRC].
2. Endangers national security, discloses state secrets, subverts the government, destroys the unity of the country.
3. Damages the honour and the interests of the State.
4. Instigates ethnic hatred or ethnic discrimination, destroys the unity of China's nationalities.
5. Has negative effects on the State's policy on religion, propagates evil cults or feudal superstition.
6. Disseminates rumours, disturbs social order, undermines social stability.
7. Spreads lewdness, pornography, gambling, violence, murder, terror or instigates crime.
8. Offends or defames other people, infringes upon the rights and interests of other people.
9. Other contents that are forbidden by law or administrative regulations.³²

Notes

¹ Gudrun Wacker, "The Internet and Censorship in China," in *China and the Internet*, eds. Christopher Hughes and Gudrun Wacker (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 58.

² Robert Lathan, ed., *Bombs and Bandwidth: The Emerging Relationship Between Information Technology and Security* (New York: The New York Press, 2003), 2-3.

³ Christopher Hughes, "Fighting the Smokeless War," in *China and the Internet*, eds. Christopher Hughes and Gundrun Wacker (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 141.

⁴ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶ Ideology is a persistent and popular concept in modern political thought; however, it remains an obscure term attached to a variety of definitions and interpretations, all of which conceptualize ideology in particular ways. For the purposes of this paper, ideology will refer to a collection of ideas, principles, myths, symbols, etc., which together can function as a system of thought be it political, economic or otherwise.

⁷ Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

⁹ Shih-Diing LIU, "China's Popular Nationalism on the Internet: Report of the Anti-Japan Network Struggles," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (2006): 144.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹¹ Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, 23.

¹² Tamara Renee Shie, "The Tangled Web: Does the Internet Offer Promise or Peril for the Communist Party," *Journal of Contemporary China* 13, no. 40 (2004): 537.

¹³ Mao Ze Dong, quoted in Shie, 523.

¹⁴ Guobun Yang, "The Internet and Civil Society in China: A Preliminary Assessment," *Journal of Contemporary China* 12, no. 36 (2003): 455.

¹⁵ Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, 21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁸ Shie, 529.

¹⁹ Hughes, 141-145.

²⁰ Wacker, 62.

²¹ For a full list of items see Appendix.

²² Wacker, 65.

²³ Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, 27.

²⁴ LIU, 147.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 147-149.

²⁶ Wacker, 68.

²⁷ Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, 25.

²⁸ Wacker, 66.

²⁹ Paul Baker and Andrew Ward, "Bridging Temporal and Spatial Gaps: The Role of Information and Communication in Defining Communities," *Information, Community and Society* 5, no. 2 (2002): 208.

³⁰ Yang, 467.

³¹ Paul Williams, "Critical Security Studies," in *International Security and its Critics*, ed. Alex Bellamy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 144.

³² Wacker, 62.